

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2023/24 SEASON**



**BRIAN AND CHARLES**  
(Language: English)

Director: Jim Archer, 2022. Running time: 90 minutes.  
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 6 December 2023.

“Mary Shelley’s archetypal “Modern Prometheus” narrative is given an absurdist modern twist by actors and co-writers David Earl and Chris Hayward in this sweet-natured and hugely likable odd-couple fable about an eccentric inventor and his ramshackle robot. Mixing DIY physical-comedy charm (there’s a touch of *Silent Running*’s anthropomorphic drones in the droid’s boxy movements) with sentimental tragicomic melancholia, this Sundance festival favourite offers a delightful antidote to the horrors of the world news cycle and the cynicism of the blockbuster franchises that currently pass for “fantasy” entertainment.

“I was very lonely,” explains Brian (Earl), a singular fellow who lives in a remote cottage in the valleys of north Wales, where he spends his time in his “infamous inventions pantry” (AKA his cowshed). Here, he knocks together outlandishly madcap creations such as the pinecone bag, the flying cuckoo clock, the egg belt and trawler nets for shoes – until one day the discovery of a fly-tipped mannequin head gives him bigger ideas. Like an amiable cross between Caractacus Potts and Victor Frankenstein, Brian drags the disembodied head and an old washing machine into his workshop and, with a little help from a convenient lightning storm, breathes haphazard life into a childishly sentient robot.

This is Charles (Chris Hayward), a latterday Tin Man with wildly mismatched body parts and a glitchy Max Headroom voice who wouldn’t seem out of place in a Wallace and Gromit animation. “I am your friend,” declares Charles, whose twitchy feet are made for dancing and whose wonder at the world around him (“How far does the ‘outside’ go? Does it stop at the tree?”) weirdly recalls that of the young survivor from Room. Brian thinks its best to keep Charles (who grandly adopts the surname “Petrescu”) a secret from the locals, and so the pair spend their days playing darts, cooking cabbages, riding bikes, having pillow fights and watching TV travel shows that give Charles a wanderlust to visit places like “Hono-loop-loop”.

It’s an idyllic existence, ecstatically captured in a montage played out to the Turtles’ “Happy Together”. Yet all too soon, electronic adolescence dawns and Charles starts to resemble a stropky teenager, albeit one whose tiny head looks more like that of an eccentric professor and whose wayward manner will strike

a chord with anyone who has experienced older relatives succumbing to the strange infantilisation of Alzheimer's.

The characters of Brian and Charles grew out of an internet radio show and a live standup act that spawned an eye-catching short film in 2017. In that original screen incarnation, the only real narrative tension came from Brian locking Charles in a shed after he pilfered one of his prize cabbages, before sending him off to live under a tree – a decision he almost instantly regretted. For the feature, there's clearly a need to up the dramatic ante. Thus we are introduced to local bully and bonfire-builder Eddie Tommington (Jamie Michie) whose family terrorise the neighbourhood; and to Hazel (Louise Brealey), a kindred spirit who lives with her domineering mother and a talkative parrot, and whose company Charles instinctively encourages Brian to court, with tenderly touching results.

Director Jim Archer, whose television CV includes stints on the BBC's *The Young Offenders* and Channel 4's *Big Boys*, says that *Brian and Charles* is “primarily about loneliness and the power of friendship and companionship”, a theme this marvellously raggedy film shares with more polished stateside AI productions such as *Marjorie Prime* and, more particularly, *Robot & Frank*. Here, the humour is distinctly British, with the nervous laughter of Brian's to-camera monologues (the film has a very loose mock-doc structure) evoking the spirit of Ricky Gervais, with whom Earl has collaborated on shows such as *Derek*, with which this shares some tonal similarities.

Director of photography Murren Tullett lends a glowing cinematic grandeur to the bleakly beautiful widescreen exteriors, while composer Daniel Pemberton's score blends nursery-rhyme innocence with an electronic sheen that perfectly embodies the duelling elements of Charles's fairytale-like character. The result has homemade charm to spare, proving delightfully ridiculous but also poignant. Oh, and while this may not be a megabucks Marvel movie with umpteen fatuous end-credits scenes, it's well worth sticking around for the Charles Petrescu rap that is nestled away at the very end of the film.”

**Mark Kermode, *The Observer*, 8 July 2022.**

“Even as the low-key mockumentary *Brian and Charles* impressively scales down a sci-fi concept to fable size, it neither does much to maintain its oddness nor finds that right mix of comedy and pathos to have much impact. Introduced in a nighttime long shot as he welds in a very crammed farm shed, lonely Welshman Brian (David Earl) is a bearded, shambolic handyman with a keep-trying philosophy toward life. That outlook seems born of necessity, having referenced a “topsy-turvy” existence, and showing off bizarre inventions (a belt that holds eggs, a pinecone-studded bag, a cabbage bin) that suggest an imagination missing a usefulness chip.

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He decides to build a discarded-parts robot — “to help me lift things,” he convinces himself — and it’s an unwieldy creature, of course: 7 feet tall, with a boxy torso, a white-tufted mannequin’s head, a geriatric’s leisurewear (cardigan and bow tie), and a buzzing, blue-lighted sensor in one eye. But when it proves sentient, friendly and willing to learn, Brian names the robot Charles and begins to relish his new role as combination pal, caretaker and worried father figure. *Brian and Charles* (acted by Chris Hayward, whose Leonard Rossiter-like voice is perfectly pitched between gentlemanly and mechanical) even share a love of cabbage.

Adapted from a couple of characters Earl and Hayward have performed in stand-up and in a short film, *Brian and Charles* is just daft enough a premise to spark a pilot light of charm, but that makes its superficial meandering so frustrating — the warmth has nowhere to go. Although never explaining to us the technology is a sign of storytelling smarts, for example (this isn’t world-building, after all), the mockumentary format that director Jim Archer uses is lazy filmmaking — the only reason it seems to be there is to justify Brian’s who-I-am ramblings in the early going, which are more often just eccentric or explanatory than illuminatingly funny.

More worrisome is when the bonding montage scored to the Turtles’ “Happy Together” arrives, and you can tell the filmmakers aren’t clear whether this is a tongue-in-cheek jab at a standard convention or an honest bid for feeling — either way, groaning is the only appropriate response.

Though Charles’ growing cheekiness and need for independence is amusing, once his novelty as a Python-esque Pinocchio is gone, there’s a sharp drop-off in creativity as the filmmakers add blasé elements meant to raise the stakes for Brian’s newfound sociability: an equally shy love interest named Hazel (Louise Brealy), and a nearby family of bullies, led by the violent Eddie (Jamie Michie). Occasionally, one gets a beautifully photographed insert of sheep against the picturesque Welsh countryside, but outside that (and, well, cabbage), *Brian and Charles* doesn’t really feel of its place. Like a lot of comedy these days, it could exist anywhere, and it feels more like an extended skit in front of a backdrop than something rooted. It’s a light dusting of feel-good whimsy that will make some yawn and some smile and maybe even some go as Charles for Halloween.”

**Robert Abele, *Los Angeles Times*, June 16, 2022**

“This summer’s surprise buddy comedy has arrived in British import *Brian and Charles*. Like a modern age Pinocchio or Frankenstein as if told by a tenderhearted jokester like Taika Waititi, its duo serves up a heartwarming story of friendship between two oddballs: one man, one machine.

The film premiered at this year’s [2022] Sundance Film Festival, where its lighthearted charm fit alongside the most heralded crowd-pleasers about outsiders that have launched there, like *Little Miss Sunshine* or *Napoleon Dynamite*. While Brian and Charles didn’t make quite as much festival noise, it should be primed to follow in their comedy-counterprogramming footsteps. A modest-scale antidote to the bombast and bloat of summer entertainment spectacles, *Brian and Charles* brings more down-to-earth delights to the summer moviegoing season.

Expanding from their 2017 short film of the same name, the film reunites director Jim Archer with writer-stars David Earl and Chris Hayward, respectively playing Brian and his invention Charles. The film is set in a remote village in Wales, where sweet Brian lives alone and is mildly depressed. He’s kept busy only by his “inventions pantry” of electronic detritus and spare objects. In a fit of fancy, he decides to assemble a robot companion, resulting in another failure in a series of them. But on a stormy night, his creation comes to life and Brian finds more than he bargained for.

Assembled from stray parts like a mannequin head, a washing machine, and a glowing blue light for an eye, Charles is awkward both in his limited but curious worldview and his lurching physicality. Brian has designed him as a quintessential gentleman in a cardigan and bowtie, but in practicality, he is not so graceful, given his topheavy maladroit body that the film maximizes to comedic effect. Charles awakens with a primitive vocabulary and understanding of the world, but with a preternaturally inquisitive desire to learn and experience as much as life will offer his operating system. Temperamentally, Charles is half *Short Circuit*’s Johnny 5, half puppy; physically, he’s Jim Broadbent by way of Klaus Nomi.

But while Charles is hilarious because of the rigid, non-human expression that the film’s creators lend him, the filmmakers make him special by giving him a relatable emotional journey. Hayward gives an impressive vocal performance despite the character’s limitations, mining laughs and angst through a commitment to Charles’s mechanical expressiveness. You are more likely to find discernable human inflection in the average household device than in Charles, yet Hayward still achieves unexpected childlike humanity.

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It's smart that the film stays vague on the hows with which this droll, oversized mecha-Pinocchio is brought to life, keeping Brian and Charles' friendship (and the uproarious trials of teaching the latter such everyday tasks as watching television and going to bed) its central focus. It's not important that we understand what technical wizardry makes the low-fi Charles function. Instead, the film hinges on us seeing his urge to understand and be a part of human life. And how being Charles' ambassador to the world affects the solitary, timid Brian.

As much as Hayward finds something believably human as a robot, Earl is touching when performing Brian's struggle to express himself, lost in his own communication struggles. There are contradictory impulses in Brian to both be seen and to hide. He enjoys his loner status, yet welcomes the unseen documentary crew interviewing him at the start of the film; he has a romantic flirtation, but stalls. This immediately puts Brian and Charles' interests at odds, leaving the film to marinate in the idyllic solitude of rural life conflicting with the desire to want something beyond the confines of one's small slice of the world. What the film lacks in surprising plot developments, it instead offers up this rich core of emotional truth, along with its winning humor.

Brian himself is somewhat of an outsider in his small village, which fuels his protectiveness over the friend he has created. In this way, Brian and Charles' relationship is as much parent-child as it is spiritual equals, creating a more complex portrait of friendship than you might expect from the film's lowkey delivery. Charles' questions about life serve as a mirror to Brian's own anxieties; in the ways he protects Charles by omitting the uncomfortable or by keeping his existence a secret, Brian reveals his own hidden desires to protect himself. Of course, Brian's fears prove to be true when Charles is immediately treated cruelly once he eventually encounters the townspeople.

The film may be whimsical, but it remains grounded in a hard reality, where people struggle to understand the world around them and their place within it. Ultimately Brian may be more of an outsider than the nonhuman Charles because Charles is more open to whatever the world has in store for him.

The film inhabits several genres at once—off-center comedy, mockumentary, science fiction—but never leans too far into any one of them. It's a sophisticated approach with an effectively delicate touch, perhaps one that is self aware and wisely avoidant of the ways that this story could quickly become cloyingly saccharine.

Similarly, it eschews obvious takes on modern personified gadgetry. Charles isn't Siri with sentience; the film isn't interested in that kind of high concept pretension. Instead, it has something more subtle to say about how modern innovations that replace human interactions might help us to let go of our defenses rather than the prevailing presumption that they build more.

*Brian and Charles* is a rare type of comedy, one that earns its laughs and emotional uplifts with laidback confidence and insight. It's a humble effort, one all the more valuable as the summer offers louder and less emotionally fulfilling genre exercises than this.

*Brian and Charles* satisfies on its own terms, and therefore stands in sharp contrast to the recent disappointments of larger scale films like *Jurassic World: Dominion* and *Lightyear*. But this also primes it to become the kind of quintessential counterprogramming that can break out in a busy summer season, especially for audiences seeking out something a little more real. In *Brian and Charles*, audiences will get artificial intelligence and authentic friendship.”

**Chris Feil, *The Daily Beast*, June 15, 2022.**

“Not every short film translates well into the feature film format, and unfortunately that is the case for *Brian and Charles*. What was a wonderfully weird 13-minute short about depression, isolation, and the power of companionship has been stretched far too thin.

In expanding the story beyond just the relationship between the eccentric Brian (played by British comedian and co-writer David Earl) and his cabbage-loving robot creation Charles (voice by co-writer Chris Hayward), the writers rely heavily on characters who feel like clichés. They've added an awkward love interest (an under-used Louise Brealey) and a villain who is basically just a grown-up high school bully grown into a town bully. It takes more suspension of disbelief that an entire village would let this man behave this way than it does to believe Brian could build Charles out of a washing machine.

Also held over from the short is the film's documentary framing, however in this longer iteration it just doesn't work. In the short, Brian and Charles were interviewed after living together for years, here the documentary crew is already following Brian from the get-go with no explanation. At first it could be interpreted as a commentary on Brian's mental health, but other characters occasionally acknowledge the never-seen camera crew as well. It might have been less jarring if they leaned a little further into a straight-up mockumentary style.

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There are some things that do work. The Wales countryside is striking, and Hayward's vocal performance as robot Charles, who vaguely looks like a very square Jim Broadbent, is genuinely funny and charming. However, Earl's eccentricities quickly become grating and by the end you really want a better companion for sweet Charles. What should be a story about the power of companionship inadvertently turns into a cautionary tale about toxic friendships."

**Marya E. Gates, *Roger Ebert.com*, January 24, 2022.**